

Original citation:

Radaelli, Giovanni, Guerci, Marco, Cabras, Federica and dalla Chiesa, Nando (2018) How are professionals recruited by external agents in misconduct projects? The infiltration of organized crime in a university. *Human Relations* . doi:10.1177/0018726718782616

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1 **HOW ARE PROFESSIONALS RECRUITED BY EXTERNAL AGENTS IN MISCONDUCT**
2 **PROJECTS? The infiltration of organized crime in a university**

3 **ABSTRACT**

4 Private firms, crime organizations or states may successfully recruit professionals in misconduct
5 projects. How they do so remains however under-investigated. Past studies mostly take
6 professionals' perspective, or limit the organizational initiative of external agents to perverse
7 incentives and threats. Our study shows instead how external agents may penetrate governance
8 bodies and professional events to recruit and control professionals, who are both aware of and
9 reluctant toward misconduct. Our longitudinal case study used judicial and non-judicial sources to
10 analyse how a mafia clan infiltrated Troy University, and controlled the trade of exams and
11 admissions for decades. The clan selected Troy University because of the presence of professors
12 pre-disposed toward misconduct. The clan infiltrated the pre-disposed professors inside governance
13 bodies and students inside academic events to recruit the reluctant professors with peer pressures,
14 situated threats and administrative controls. It then exploited a generalized code of silence to control
15 professionals for years. Overall, the study highlights the combination of perverse and pervasive
16 mechanisms to recruit professionals; the role of corrupt professionals as lynchpin between external
17 agents and reluctant peers; and the perverse exploitation of normal professional practices of
18 autonomy, trusteeship and multiple embeddedness.

19 **INTRODUCTION**

20 Professional misconduct is generally regarded an aberration that undermines the usefulness and
21 legitimacy of professions in society (Dinovitzer et al., 2015; Muzio et al., 2016). Yet, professional
22 misconduct might interest external agents, such as corporations, state, private users and organized
23 crime (Dinovitzer et al., 2014; Gunz and Gunz, 2006; Newburn, 2017). The appeal of professional
24 misconduct is twofold. First, professionals control key services, such as education, healthcare,
25 arbitrations and auditing. By steering professionals towards misconduct, external agents may obtain
26 important benefits or remove crucial barriers. Enron and Parmalat, for instance, exploited auditors'

27 misconduct to thrive financially (Grey, 2003; Sikka, 2009). Second, professional misconduct is hard
28 to detect for non-professional actors. Professional work requires expert knowledge that is
29 inaccessible to most, so that professional decisions cannot be fully standardized or scrutinized
30 externally (Abbott, 1988; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Professional work is subject to peer reviews,
31 but peers may be reluctant to condemn colleagues (Finn and Lampe, 1992; Kovach et al., 2009).
32 The deterioration of professional practices is thus difficult to detect when external agents ‘hide’
33 behind professionals. Again, firms like Enron and Parmalat exploited auditors’ misconduct as
34 professional peers struggled to recognize and report any wrongdoing (Gabbioneta et al., 2013;
35 Mitchell and Sikka, 2011). Accordingly, external agents try to facilitate and control professional
36 misconduct (Dinovitzer et al., 2014; Muzio et al., 2016). Medical studies have reported several
37 attempts by pharmaceutical companies to influence drug prescriptions in general practice
38 (Moynihan and Cassels, 2008). Similarly, historical studies have reported attempts by dictators to
39 deviate the work of judges, lawyers, engineers and educators (e.g. Jarausch, 1990).

40 While it is understood that external agents may interfere with professional work, in-depth analyses
41 of *how* they intentionally do so remain scarce and sparse (Muzio et al., 2013; 2016; Newburn, 2017;
42 Palmer, 2012). Past research has mostly taken the perspective of the captured professionals,
43 explaining the perverse and pervasive reasons why they engage in misconduct, and how they
44 respond to external stimuli (Dixon-Woods et al., 2011; Muzio et al., 2016; Palmer, 2012).
45 Significantly less is known from the perspective of the capturing agents, and particularly about their
46 capacity as external agents to penetrate organizational boundaries and recruit professionals in a
47 misconduct project. Misconduct project represent the deliberate attempt of external agents to
48 deviate professionals from their code of conduct; and to exploit the resources and influence of the
49 recruited professionals to advance their private agenda. Some studies investigated how non-
50 professional actors embedded in the organization (e.g. managers) try to influence professional work,
51 typically toward better conduct and ineffectively (Currie et al., 2012; Llewellyn, 2001; Radaelli et
52 al., 2017). Others showed how social agents external to both profession and organization try to

53 influence the field in which these operate, typically toward better conduct and ineffectively
54 (Gabbioneta et al., 2013; Muzio et al., 2016). Differently, we ask: *how do external agents penetrate*
55 *professional organizations, recruit professionals in misconduct projects, and keep them under*
56 *control?*

57 To answer this question, the present study analyses the deliberate strategies enacted by a mafia clan
58 to recruit professors at an Italian university in their misconduct project. The mafia clan sought to
59 facilitate the graduation of its affiliates by controlling how professors graded exams. The clan had
60 to recruit several professors, most of whom were disinclined to pursue private interests and mafia
61 strategies. Nevertheless, the clan successfully penetrated the university and controlled professors'
62 behaviours. It did so with a combination of 'perverse' and 'pervasive' mechanisms (Palmer, 2012),
63 which (i) exploited the presence of professors already pre-disposed toward misconduct, who
64 enacted threats and controls against the more reluctant ones; (ii) infiltrated core decision-making
65 spaces to normalize misconduct and (iii) exploited professional features (i.e. autonomy, trusteeship,
66 and embeddedness) that were originally intended to prevent misconduct.

67 **PERVERSE AND PERVASIVE ANTECEDENTS OF MISCONDUCT**

68 Past research identified numerous antecedents of misconduct (Muzio et al., 2016; Newburn, 2017;
69 Palmer, 2012). Misconduct may sometimes be an 'abnormal' behaviour that individuals perform
70 against their profession; or a 'normal' behaviour legitimized by organizations and professions. On
71 this basis, Palmer (2012) distinguished *perverse* and *pervasive* antecedents of misconduct.

72 Perverse antecedents are processes and structures that deviate from the professional norm of
73 prioritizing the interests of clients and society. This perspective conceives misconduct as an
74 aberration of 'normal' good conduct perpetrated by individuals who intentionally pursue their self-
75 interest *against* their organization and clients; or fail to account for the ethical consequences of their
76 actions. Individuals may, for instance, accept monetary and non-monetary incentives in exchange
77 for misconduct; or they may succumb to threats (Kish et al., 2010; Moynihan and Cassels, 2008). If
78 the opportunities for personal incentives outweigh the risks of being sanctioned, individuals may

79 consider misconduct as the most rational choice (Nadler and Lawler, 1977). Professional fields may
80 be favourable contexts for perverse mechanisms for five reasons. First, professional work has
81 immense impacts on society – so it is likely to attract the interest of external parties (Abbott, 1986;
82 Buonanno et al., 2015). Second, principles of autonomy and practices of self-regulation undermine
83 managerial and regulative attempts to interfere with professional work (Currie et al., 2012;
84 Llewellyn, 2001). Professional work acquires an “opaque quality” that cannot be fully scrutinized
85 by non-professionals (von Nordenflycht, 2010). Professionals may thus hide their misconduct
86 easily, especially if peers are slow or uninterested in monitoring their work (Kovach et al., 2009;
87 McGivern and Ferlie, 2007). Third, professional organizations may attract an adverse selection of
88 individuals. Individuals may become professionals out of vocation, and morally self-regulate
89 against misconduct (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933). Furthermore, professional work has explicit
90 trusteeship norms that prioritize client interest over self-interest (von Nordenflycht, 2010).
91 However, individuals may also exploit the profession for material benefits because they may gain
92 exposure, power and control. Fourth, peer reviews may generate tight and defensive professional
93 groups which deny or justify misconduct to protect their members (Kellogg, 2009; Sikka, 2009).
94 Finally, professionals may be so focused on serving the interests of their clients that they ultimately
95 justify misconduct (Gabbioneta et al., 2013; Grey, 2003; Mitchell, 1980).

96 *Pervasive* antecedents instead normalize misconduct in organizations and professions. Individuals
97 may be misguided by existing roles and processes; or they may imitate behaviours observed in their
98 social environment (Palmer, 2012). First, professionals may comply with inappropriate orders from
99 their chain of command without questioning their integrity or appropriateness. Kellogg (2009), for
100 instance, highlighted how junior doctors were pushed by their superiors to ‘soldier up’ to prevent
101 the application of a new regulation. Second, professionals may be misguided by established rules
102 and procedures which, even if designed to pursue clients’ interests, may still elicit wrongdoing (El-
103 Hai, 2005; Woof et al., 1999). Third, the division of labour among professionals may enable
104 wrongdoing. When professionals lose full control of, and accountability for, a task, they may

105 delegate core ethical decisions to others (Solet et al., 2005; Tucker and Edmondson, 2003). Failures
106 in communication and coordination between professionals may weaken the defences against
107 wrongdoing, as each actor fails to act (Morris and Moore, 2000). Fourth, professionals may receive
108 cues from peers, subordinates, and clients about the appropriate conduct to navigate uncertain
109 scenarios; or to receive social approval. Past studies have used social information processing, social
110 comparison and liking-based theories to highlight how individuals replicate dubious behaviours
111 pursued by (but not sanctioned for) peers, competitors and experts (Franke et al., 2013; Scharff,
112 2005). Professionals may replicate others' behaviours to gain legitimacy in or reciprocity from their
113 professional group. Gabbioneta et al. (2014), for instance, highlighted cases of institutional
114 ascription where professionals gained their status from their association with an elite organization
115 and replicated inappropriate behaviours observed in the network gravitating around it.

116 **EXTERNAL AGENTS AND THE PROMOTION OF PROFESSIONAL MISCONDUCT**

117 Past research mostly overlooked the capacity of external agents to penetrate organizational
118 boundaries and recruit professionals for misconduct. Studies on the influence of external agents,
119 e.g. corporations and states, typically focused on their attempts to facilitate the professionalization
120 of groups or improve professionals' code of conduct. States, for instance, comprehensively provide
121 ad-hoc incentives and sanctions; pervasive structures, such as administrative systems, standards,
122 and guidelines; and recruitment strategies, e.g. admission exams and public tenders, to identify
123 appropriate professionals (Cooper and Robson, 2006; Suddaby et al., 2007).

124 How external agents develop and implement strategies to facilitate professional misconduct remains
125 instead scarce and sparse. Some studies reported how large corporations or associations use
126 incentives to lure professionals, e.g. pharmaceutical companies trying to alter general practitioners'
127 drug prescriptions (Moynihan and Cassels, 2008), or companies gaining auditors' support through
128 allusive incentives (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Grey, 2003; Palmer, 2012). These external agents
129 appear as tactical players which exploit shortcomings in the professional field for their self-interest,
130 rather than being strategists which plan, design and implement ad-hoc interventions to facilitate and

131 control misconduct. Alternatively, external agents are described as obtuse players which create
132 misconduct by mistake. Palmer (2012), for instance, observed how social agents may draw the line
133 between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in ways that unintentionally create the conditions for misconduct.
134 Historical accounts, by comparison, provide more direct evidence on the strategic skills of external
135 agents to intentionally enable professional misconduct. Jarausch (1990), for instance, explained how
136 the Nazi government altered the composition and work of multiple professions through perverse
137 and pervasive initiatives, e.g. incentives, threats, obtrusive controls and hierarchical pressures.
138 This body of research presents two gaps, which we seek to address. First, although we know that
139 multiple antecedents may facilitate professional misconduct, it is still unclear what external agents
140 actually use for this purpose. Taking the perspective of the captured professionals, past studies have
141 focused on the key dominant interventions that ‘hit the mark’; and how these are perceived and
142 received by the professionals. Taking the perspective of the capturing agent, we seek to provide a
143 more comprehensive view of all the interventions as intended and enacted by the external agents.
144 Second, previous studies focus on field-level interventions enacted by external agents to pollute the
145 institutional context in which professionals operate. They provide limited knowledge on the
146 capacity of external agents to breach the organizational boundaries, recruit professionals in a
147 misconduct project, and control their behaviours over time. Our knowledge remains limited to the
148 use of perverse mechanisms (e.g. incentives and threats), while neglecting the possibility for
149 external agents to influence also the pervasive processes in an organization. Combining these gaps,
150 our study thus asks: *how do external agents penetrate professional organizations, recruit*
151 *professionals in their misconduct projects, and keep them under control?*

152 **EMPIRICAL CONTEXT**

153 To address this question, we analyse the strategy enacted by a mafia clan to recruit professors at an
154 Italian university from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. Italian legislation defines a mafia as “an
155 association of three or more people... whose members take advantage of intimidation, submission
156 and a code of silence (*omertà*) to commit crimes, take control over economic activities or achieve

157 unjust advantages for themselves or others” (Article 416-bis; Italian Criminal Code). Different
158 crime syndicates originated from different Italian regions, e.g., *Cosa Nostra* from Sicily, *Camorra*
159 from Campania, and *Ndrangheta* from Calabria. To preserve the confidentiality of the victims, we
160 anonymized the university where the misconduct took place (here referred to as ‘Troy’), and the
161 crime syndicate involved (here generically described as ‘*mafia*’). The *mafia* organization considered
162 is a confederation of clans, each with full jurisdiction on a territory and not subordinated to other
163 ‘authorities’. Clans are family-based, as only family members inherit and hold key positions of
164 power; external people can be enrolled however as full members, affiliates, or collaborators. The
165 business of *mafia* clans is primarily illegal, e.g. drug-trafficking; fraud; loan sharking; homicide;
166 robbery; extortion; kidnapping; tax evasion; bribery.

167 The project of professional misconduct presented in this study involved the graduation of mafia
168 affiliates as healthcare professionals from Troy University. The clan had a list of students (either
169 affiliated to the clan or paying the clan for ‘favours’) who ‘had to’ pass the exam with ‘good
170 marks’. It then recruited university professors to grade affiliates’ exams positively, making sure that
171 every identified student *quickly* graduated; relax, prevent or resist peer reviews that might detect
172 anomalies; and prevent or adjust the implementation of new regulations against mafia infiltration.
173 The graduating affiliates would then be allocated to healthcare organizations (e.g. clinics, hospitals
174 and commissioning groups) to enact another stage of misconduct, e.g. provide false medical reports,
175 divert public funding, or engage in pork barrelling. In this study, we focus only on the first stage,
176 i.e. how the mafia clan recruited university professors to facilitate the graduation of ‘its’ students.

177 **METHODS**

178 To investigate how the mafia clan recruited professors at Troy University, we employed a
179 longitudinal case study approach (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). We selected Troy University because it
180 represented an extreme case of an ‘abhorrent’ external agent (i.e. a mafia clan) penetrating a
181 professional organization, recruiting professionals and controlling their misconduct for decades.
182 The case is extreme in the intensity of professionals’ subjugation because of the methods employed

183 by the clan. The case reveals clear strategic intent and dynamics of professional recruitment, which
184 are elsewhere more ambiguous. The recruitment of the Troy professors can thus “illuminate and
185 extend relationships among constructs or develop deeper understanding of processes” (p. 1114).

186 To analyse this phenomenon, the study used primarily legal and historical data. The role of crime
187 syndicates in controlling professional groups is typically inaccessible to traditional research
188 approaches (Neuman and Wiegand, 2000) because information about the violation of rules and the
189 exploitation of people is withheld from researchers and accessible only by police forces and legal
190 authorities. Our longitudinal analysis thus started with evidence of the misconduct (from trial
191 verdicts) and then analysed the design and implementation of its strategy by the clan.

192 Our data collection strategy sought a “deep immersion over time in the focal phenomena with
193 openness to many types of rich data—from text, observations, and surveys to, more recently,
194 Twitter feeds, YouTube videos, and Facebook posts” (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; p. 1114). As the main
195 agents of misconduct could not be directly accessed for interviews or observations, we collected the
196 following secondary data. Arrest warrants and trial verdicts were our main sources of data. These
197 documents comprise a wealth of primary data collected by law enforcement and judicial actors
198 through wiretaps and interrogations. These authorities collected information on why the clan chose
199 Troy University, on the main actors involved, on the tactics used to recruit and control
200 professionals, and on their consequences. The interrogations and trials were thus structured as
201 interviews. These documents focused primarily on events that violated criminal and civil law; but
202 they also included information on the context within which these activities were performed, e.g. on
203 the context pre-existing the mafia infiltration or the behaviours of honest professionals and students
204 in response to misconduct. The reliability of these sources is guaranteed by the impartiality of
205 judges presiding over the trials; by the existence of legal processes through which defence and
206 prosecution attorneys can dispute the validity and interpretation of every single datum (and data
207 source); and by the availability of the trial data/results to public scrutiny. Arrest warrants, for
208 instance, are issued by judges who review the available evidence and explain the motivations for

209 their decisions. We used arrest warrants not as indictments against individuals (because the trial
210 would eventually evaluate their guilt), but rather as repositories of primary data (e.g. wiretapped
211 conversations, interrogation quotes). More generally, our study was not focused on evaluating the
212 decisions of the judges, but on analysing the available data on professional misconduct.

213 Our dataset included: (i) documents on Trial A, specifically focused on the mafia recruitment of
214 professors at Troy University and (ii) Trial B, focused on the broader strategy of infiltration of this
215 clan in Italian public administration and private businesses. Trial A provided the main source of
216 data. Its arrest warrants and verdicts represent large repositories of data, such as wiretaps,
217 testimonies, police and judicial interrogations. Hence, quotes from Trial A are privileged in the
218 findings. Trial B adds contextual data on the motivations and organization of the clan, and its
219 actions. Contributing to the validity of the data, the trials were presided over by different judges
220 (who cross-validated previous verdicts); and each trial went through the three judicial levels (each
221 with different judges). Hence we had multiple triads of judges analysing the phenomenon. To be
222 noted is that appeal and last resort for Trial A could not be accessed as they were withheld by the
223 law courts (currently in the process of digitalizing and anonymizing the documents). We are
224 however confident that we do not have incomplete or inappropriate data because we (i) had
225 reassurances from the judges presiding over the missing trials that these confirmed the full trial and
226 did not introduce radically new elements; and (ii) we collected data from journalistic and
227 parliamentary sources, which provided day-by-day and summary proceedings of the appeal and last
228 resort trials, and confirmed that no radical changes occurred. These data sources included: articles
229 from local and national newspapers; books; documentaries; parliamentary documents (e.g. reports
230 and proceedings of the Antimafia Commission). These data were important for four reasons. First,
231 they further validated our main data as specialized journalists and commentators did not challenge
232 the method and results of the trials. Second, we gained full access to data either reported partially or
233 only referenced in the trial documents. Third, these sources added information about professionals'
234 perceptions of and opinions on the infiltration of Troy University, and more details on non-illegal

235 phenomena that the trial analysed briefly. Fourth, they provided information on the appeal and last
236 resort verdicts, confirming the findings of the full trial. Ethical considerations apply to our data
237 collection. Given the sensitive nature of the trial (with the intimidation of some individuals and
238 legal prosecution of others), we preserved the anonymity of individuals involved in the events,
239 excluding details on the mafia clan, and the infiltrated university, which could identify the case. We
240 did *not* collect data (e.g. interviews, affidavits, reports) prepared by defence and prosecution, and
241 not validated by independent third-parties. These data could be biased and reduce the reliability of
242 our analysis. Table 1 describes our final dataset.

243 *[Table 1 about here]*

244 Our data analysis was informed by previous literature, which is rich with explanations as to why
245 professionals engage in misconduct, but not how external agents design their recruitment strategies.
246 As we could not test hypotheses, we generated theory from the data, and compared the emerging
247 theory with existing findings on perverse and pervasive antecedents of misconduct (Palmer, 2012).
248 We followed the advice of Eisenhardt et al. (2016), i.e. gather data “with some sort of memoing,
249 [build] thick descriptions from the data, such as chronologies or vignettes; code raw data into first-
250 order codes or measures; raise them to a more abstract level, such as second-order themes or
251 constructs; use constant comparison between emergent theory and data and other tactics to generate
252 creative insights; and engage with literature to sharpen both the constructs and the theoretical logic
253 of the relationships between constructs” (p. 1114). We organized our analytical strategy in three
254 steps. First, we identified relevant quotes from the available data and developed provisional
255 empirical labels. For instance, one arrest warrant specified that “Professor [R] could reach any
256 department for misconduct, to repay the clan for money s/he had been loaned”. This quote
257 empirically links misconduct with money repayment. Second, we aggregated similar first-order
258 quotes into more abstract themes, informed when possible by previous literature (e.g., Palmer,
259 2012). The above quote and similar ones, for instance, highlighted that some professors pursued
260 misconduct for *incentives*. Third, we abstracted and aggregated the empirical themes in theoretical

261 dimensions, explaining how the perverse and pervasive approaches were combined in a
262 comprehensive strategy. For instance, we found evidence that some professors were pre-disposed
263 towards misconduct and were recruited with both perverse and pervasive mechanisms. The coding
264 process is exemplified in Table 2. We identified four stages of recruitment, detailed below.

265 [Table 2 about here]

266 **THE PROFESSIONAL MISCONDUCT PROJECT**

267 The clan required professors from Troy University to support the graduation of a heterogeneous
268 cadre of students. Some students were affiliated to the mafia, which envisaged their graduation as
269 healthcare professionals and their eventual placement in key hospitals. Others were ordinary
270 students who paid clan intermediaries to get help with specific exams. Clan intermediaries signalled
271 the name of these students to the ‘relevant professors’ who would: (i) provide the text and solutions
272 of the exam beforehand; (ii) award sufficiently high marks; (iii) support their placement in ad-hoc
273 specialization programmes. These misbehaviours created a “prodigious” increase in student
274 performances. The corruption was so systematic and structured that Troy University became known
275 as the “University of Exams”. The legal proceedings noted the “anomalous trajectories” of
276 “numerous students”, who had had “more than mediocre” academic careers at other universities and
277 then “miraculously” surged in performance once they moved to Troy. Students knew from the very
278 beginning that they could get favourable marks in certain exams, and paid for this privilege.
279 Knowledge of Troy University as a corrupt provider was so widespread among students that even
280 foreign students queued to join the University to help their graduation.

281 *The clan supported internal and external students of Troy University by threatening and colluding with*
282 *professors. The lower difficulty of the exams, or new attitudes towards studies cannot explain why so*
283 *many students had a prodigious improvement of their marks at Troy. Corruption was so rife that students*
284 *passed exams without even attending lectures or taking the exams (Verdict, Trial A).*

285 Notably, a young affiliate with a personal interest in medicine moved to another university to test
286 her actual medical knowledge – knowing that s/he could return to Troy to obtain a good grade.

287 *Witness [A] passed three exams at Troy without any help from the clan. S/he later transferred to [an A-*
288 *level university] to test her real skills. The transfer decision was not problematic. If s/he failed, s/he could*
289 *return to Troy and buy the exam from [professors] (Verdict, Trial A).*

290 The misconduct was perpetrated by a heterogeneous cadre of professors at Troy. Few professors
291 colluded with the clan; with them the clan used a combination of perverse and pervasive processes,
292 mostly grounded on (i) the use of incentives, and (ii) hierarchical control by the mafia hierarchy.
293 Other professors participated against their will, so that the clan employed a more forceful approach
294 using a different combination of perverse and pervasive processes grounded on (i) the use of threats,
295 and (ii) professional control by the administrative system, and social influence by peers.

296 *Troy University had bizarre phenomena related to exam marking. The clan obtained privileged treatment*
297 *for its protégées. It exploited special relations with professors through economic exchanges, reciprocal*
298 *'respect' or connivance. Some professors colluded with the clan, and exploited these opportunities.*
299 *Others succumbed to clan threats. Only few professors opposed the clan (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

300 **SELECTING AN 'APPROPRIATE' CONTEXT**

301 Before recruiting the professors, the clan targeted Troy as the appropriate context for its misconduct
302 project. It did so for a number of reasons. First, the clan had already established its authority in the
303 area, liaising with doctors and managers of important healthcare organisations, who provided false
304 medical reports, diverted public funding and performed pork barrelling. The capture of these
305 individuals established the presence of the clan in the area, and opened the doors to Troy
306 University, where they worked as professors, suppliers or administrators.

307 *Doctor [A] owned an important clinic, and was heavily involved with the clan. S/he had a tight*
308 *relationship with Member [B]. [A] used her work interactions with Troy University to entice students and*
309 *professors. [B] targeted medical students; promised the help of a 'friend' ([A]), who had other 'friends'*
310 *at the university. The students paid them, or provided clinical work in [A]'s clinic. (Verdict, Trial A).*

311 The University was also influenced by a dominant elite of local politicians, freemasons and
312 businessmen, who influenced the executive board and weakened the standards of academic rigour to
313 facilitate the graduation of their sons and daughters. The clan liaised with this elite, hoping to
314 exploit its relationships with professors and other professionals. Troy University had a pre-existing
315 reputation for 'cutting corners' with the admission and the graduation of students for the 'children'
316 of the dominant elite. Hence, some professors were already directly connected with the mafia clan,
317 and others had already accepted various forms of bribery from the dominant elite.

318 *Clan Leader [C] graduated at Troy Medical School and developed intense relationships with the political*
319 *and industrial elite in Troy. These relationships were also exploited by his brother [D], for years a full*
320 *professor at Troy University and an executive in a leading hospital (Antimafia Commission Report)*

321 Troy University, thus, was not a heavily guarded professional system focused on ensuring rigour
322 and transparency. Rather, administrators and professors had bent regulations and processes to their
323 interests. At Troy University, therefore, the clan did not need to disrupt strong professional barriers,
324 nor create a network of ‘bad professors’ from scratch. It could instead revise pre-existing academic
325 practices and re-orient them toward a more ambitious plan of not just helping a few students “here
326 and there”, but rather create a more structured commerce of exams and graduations.

327 *[Congressman E]: We must continue to investigate the relationships between the mafia and the deviated*
328 *freemasons and politicians in Troy. The infiltration of Troy University was made possible by these*
329 *preconditions. [Congressman F]: [Trial A] suggests that the infiltration of Troy University did not begin*
330 *with this clan and has probably not ended with their arrest (Antimafia Commission, proceeding 1)*

331 The clan looked for a university with a sufficiently high reputation for the graduation of its
332 affiliates. The clan did not infiltrate universities with a public reputation for being ‘too easy’ or
333 ‘corrupt’ because their graduates would be viewed with suspicion and not be employed by private
334 and public Health Care organizations. The clan targeted Troy University because it had a good
335 reputation and was the reference academic hub in the area. Rankings suggest that Troy is an above-
336 average provider, with good indicators related to medical training. Troy University has a number of
337 nationally-known alumni and is located in an important city in Italy. Its medical graduates regularly
338 find jobs in healthcare organizations in and outside the region. Hence, Troy was ‘above suspicion’.

339 *The region became lively economically and culturally due to its industrial and urban growth. The*
340 *University provided specialized courses not available elsewhere, and established itself as the key*
341 *education institution in the region (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

342 **RECRUITING AND COLLUDING WITH “PRE-DISPOSED” PROFESSORS**

343 Once the clan had established its presence in Troy, it began recruiting professors who had already
344 collaborated with it or had signalled their availability to engage in misconduct. These individuals
345 used the profession to achieve material goals, and asked for a *quid pro quo*. Hence, they were
346 recruited through perverse mechanisms, i.e. financial and non-financial incentives (e.g. money,
347 support in career progression, inclusion in elite networks, and help in other professional activities).

348 *Professor [M]’s support can be explained with: evidence of financial gains (confirmed by witnesses);*
349 *escalating the University’s ranking thanks to the clan’s support; participating in drug trafficking, gaining*
350 *additional money. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

351 These professors did not just perform misconduct, i.e. manipulate the admission, marking and
352 graduation of students; they also managed it, i.e. by identifying other corruptible peers, providing
353 incentives and threats, infiltrating the administration to disrupt monitoring activities, and liaising
354 with external stakeholders, e.g. healthcare professionals, politicians, businessmen, and freemasons.

355 *Professor [M] identified and threatened peers for the clan. Also [M] was employed the Dean's Office*
356 *where s/he prevented attempts to denounce threats and monitor exams; and ostentatiously paraded her*
357 *friendship with clan members. The clan was strategically interested in placing [M] at the centre of power*
358 *in Troy; [M] exploited this support to fulfil personal interests (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

359 Using the profession for personal benefits, these professors developed a close relationship with the
360 clan. This relationship was reinforced by two additional mechanisms.

361 First, *the clan embedded the pre-disposed professors in their culture and practices*. The clan
362 established perverse psychological contracts with the 'friendly' professors, combining threats of
363 repercussions against any betrayal with promises of rewards. The clan communicated its goals and
364 practices to these professors, who incorporated and replicated them over time. The investigation
365 revealed how these professors exchanged nicknames with the clan, appreciated their secret identity
366 as mafia collaborators, and subordinated professional interests to criminal ones. The trusteeship
367 norms aimed at the protection of students and society were subordinated to trusteeship norms
368 towards the clan (considered a new "client" to serve or a new "leader" to follow). Rather than being
369 victims of the clan, these professors participated in its functioning and reinforced its practices.

370 *Professor [M] developed a strong relationship with current and former students close to the clan. He took*
371 *advantage of these relationships receiving money or professional favours in his clinic. The relationship*
372 *became so intimate that clan members used humorous nicknames to refer to him. [M] exploited this aura*
373 *of danger to intimidate peers, and mimic mafioso behaviours (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

374 Another implication was that these professors perversely denied the legitimacy of the victims and
375 denied the injuries perpetrated to students and society. The misconduct victimized: (i) honest
376 students, who devoted more effort to study, performed better in exams, but were ultimately denied a
377 competitive advantage over the others; (ii) citizens who were exposed to incompetent healthcare
378 providers. Consistently with the mafia culture, these professors regarded honest individuals as
379 "simpletons" who were not smart or brave enough to participate in the misconduct themselves.

380 Second, *the clan subjected the pre-disposed professors to its direct chain of command*. As these
381 professors co-designed and participated in the misconduct strategy, they also became a potential
382 source of threats. The clan implemented pervasive, obtrusive controls to regulate professors'
383 behaviours and prevent any betrayals. The professors were surrounded by clan members that issued
384 orders, controlled their behaviours and implemented punishments. Professors who did not abide by
385 these rules would be punished 'through blood' within the community. Keenly aware of the
386 repercussions, the professors did not even conceive the possibility of betraying the clan.

387 *Once the requests of misconduct had escalated, Professor [G] became reluctant to continue her*
388 *relationship with Professor [M] and with the clan. S/he was pulled back into the clan, however, by*
389 *allusive threats. Her car, for instance, was stolen and "by chance" found by a young clan member in a*
390 *graveyard, with a note saying that "next time, it won't be just the car" (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

391 Being engaged in other illegal activities, these professors could not pull back from their
392 commitment. The clan threatened they would lose everything, and be disbarred from the profession,
393 so that they had to share responsibilities for the misconduct.

394 *The clan intentionally engaged professors in drugs and weapons trafficking, thus strengthening the*
395 *bonds. It threatened professors with revealing their engagement if things went wrong. If that happened,*
396 *their professional careers would be ruined (Verdict, Trial A)*

397 **RECRUITING AND CONTROLLING NON-DISPOSED PROFESSORS**

398 Only few professors colluded with the clan, so their recruitment was insufficient to support the
399 masterplan. Students asked for help in passing exams that were controlled by professors with no
400 disposition to, or experience with, misconduct. To recruit this cadre of professors, the clan adopted
401 five different initiatives. First, the clan intermediaries *identified a selected group of professors*. The
402 clan did not engage every professor at Troy University since the risks of over-recruiting outweighed
403 its benefits. Clan members excluded "incorruptible" professors who (i) refused incentives and
404 threats, and reported them to police; and (ii) were connected with anti-mafia groups or law-
405 enforcement agencies, and thus had greater chances of receiving protection. The clan would need to
406 fight these individuals physically, thus risking over-exposure of its presence in the University. To
407 avoid this, it was not inconceivable for the clan to ask students to pass exams on their own account.

408 *During a wiretapped conversation, a student complained to Member [H – also a doctor] about the refusal*
409 *of Professor [I]. [H] refused to retaliate against [I] arguing that this would escalate beyond tolerable*

410 *levels: “[It] is not reasonable. He’s a real a***ole, who can screw you in front of everybody. If I act, I*
411 *will hurt her, but this could create a media storm. Let’s stay quiet for a while (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

412 Similarly, the clan did not recruit professors who managed easy or low-credit modules. Again, the
413 benefits were not worth the risks of over-exposure. A network of advisers (consisting of ‘friendly’
414 professors and students) surveyed the modules and identified core exams that had to be controlled
415 for their importance or difficulty; and an array of professors who could be ‘safely’ captured. The
416 clan then (i) directed its students toward ‘safe’ destinations (e.g. Surgery and Dentistry); (ii)
417 recruited the relevant professors first with allusive threats, such as “you know who we are” – and
418 only subsequently with more aggressive approaches; and (iii) sometimes rejected students’ demands
419 when they were not confident they could control the professors.

420 *Doctor [N], a clinical lead in a district hospital was sure s/he could recruit ‘her’ professors with “certain*
421 *outcomes”. “I can guarantee you it is a certainty... I told Affiliate [Q] to reach Professor [P] for this*
422 *favour. [Q] knows how to keep [P] quiet and [P] knows what to do” (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

423 Second, the clan *recruited professors through threats mixed with incentives*. Threats were necessary
424 to push the reluctant professors toward misconduct; the incentives bound the professor to the clan.
425 Accepting the bribe meant that professors were co-responsible for the misconduct, and thus could
426 not deny their responsibility. The incentives took the form of financial, career or networking
427 rewards. The clan appeared especially keen to exploit the interests of these professors as medical
428 practitioners, in order to increase its presence in the medical field. High-status professors in the
429 Medical School were also medical practitioners in public hospitals or private clinics. As some
430 struggled to attract clients or sustain the costs, the clan proposed financial resources to buy new
431 technologies, or ‘free personnel’ in clinics. Some professors accepted the favour, assessing that
432 ‘small’ favours in higher education could generate large benefits in healthcare.

433 *Professor [R] had financial problems that led him to ask for loans. The clan exploited this weakness,*
434 *furnishing the loan with a ‘reasonable’ interest rate. Instead of resorting to traditional loan-shark*
435 *techniques, the clan asked for ‘favours’ in her tenure as professor and doctor (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A).*

436 Professors who refused these offers were threatened through physical extortion and psychological
437 intimidation. The investigations report how clan members threatened professors first with
438 psychological threats, and gradually escalated with small bombs, gunshots, and actual physical
439 injury. As the cliché suggests, therefore, the clan made offers that professors could not refuse.

440 Professors eventually became familiar with the mafia method, and accepted the incentives and
441 misconduct to avoid the threats. Consequently, through intimidation the clan invaded professors’
442 autonomy and controlled their decision-making without much need to escalate its intimidations.

443 *Key examples of clan intimidation: (i) Professor [G] found an unknown individual in her office, who*
444 *promoted the case of a ‘friend’ in allusive terms; (ii) Professor [S] was shot outside the faculty; (iii)*
445 *small bombs exploded outside exam rooms; (iv) gunshots were fired outside [T]’s home (Verdict, Trial A)*

446 Third, the clan *infiltrated students and used the pre-disposed professors to control the reluctant*
447 *professors*. Reluctant professors represented an even higher risk of betrayal than the pre-disposed
448 ones. To minimize this risk, these professors were also constantly monitored by the clan. Instead of
449 using its direct chain of command, the clan infiltrated lower-status members into the University, i.e.
450 (i) students benefitting from misconduct, (ii) corrupted professors; and (iii) additional clan members
451 acting as “parents”, “boyfriends”, “uncles” or “dear friends” and “showing up almost daily” in the
452 corridors or during the exams. The “constant sense of being monitored” by “arrogant and
453 intimidating people who had no reason to be there” generated a pervasive “intolerable climate of
454 oppression” (Professor L, Verdict, Trial A). On top of this, the clan also used external stakeholders
455 (e.g. businessmen, suppliers, politicians, freemasons) gravitating around the university. These clan
456 intermediaries used a combination of peer pressure, situational influence and administrative control
457 to guide professors’ behaviours. The corrupted professors used their experience and peer influence
458 to entice the reluctant professors, observe their behaviours from the inside, and exert peer pressure.

459 *Professor [M] threatened peers and paraded his friendship with well-known clan members. [M]*
460 *intimidated key people in the Dean’s Office to be allowed to join their meetings. Once there, he behaved*
461 *aggressively, demanding favours in exchange for his support for the Dean’s re-election. [M] alluded to*
462 *clan interventions to have these requests satisfied (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

463 Differently, students contributed to a more situational influence on professors. These students had
464 free access to university spaces, so they could observe professors’ behaviours daily, and impart
465 “punishments” and “warnings”. The clan infiltrated its students in various departments of the
466 university, so they could put pressure professors. These students also intimidated peers, secretaries
467 and administrators, gradually gaining their (often grudging) support or silence. Students’ pressures

468 were manifested through small, but eloquent gestures – enough to create a climate of oppression
469 and showcase the presence of the clan, but not sufficient to over-expose themselves and the clan.

470 *Professor [L] reported that [four students] usually remained in the Faculty during the exam period.*
471 *Student [O] particularly spent a lot of time ‘promoting’ the cause of other students... There was a*
472 *common pattern: a student (or ‘friend’) first demanded ‘favours’ politely, then allusively, and finally*
473 *aggressively. At that point, another student or ‘friend’ joined the former, calming things down and*
474 *suggesting that “if things get resolved”, everybody will be alright (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

475 The influence of corrupted professors and menacing students ran deep in the administrative system
476 of the University. The clan put the ‘right men in the right places’ to (i) prevent complaints from
477 reaching police forces and (ii) inhibit the creation of better monitoring systems. The clan helped the
478 election of a ‘friendly’ professor as new Dean; in exchange, s/he included relevant clan supporters
479 and affiliates in the Dean’s Office and turned a ‘blind eye’ to the infiltration. For instance, some
480 professors reported to their line managers that they had received threats from “students”; these
481 complaints were ignored, however, and never submitted to the academic boards and to the police.

482 *Professor [L] had reported several threats that s/he had received, but no action was taken by Professor*
483 *(line manager) [S] and the Dean, who refused to forward the complaints to the police. The university*
484 *administration worked against her demands, as there was a generalized tendency to minimize any*
485 *intimidation, for fears of retaliations, to preserve the “good name” of the University, but also because of*
486 *the lack of individuals willing to report and manage the complaints (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

487 Honest professors were isolated from key roles in the university. Professor L was ostracized
488 because of her stubbornness; an admission panel was threatened by Professor M to “mind its own
489 business” when it tried to exclude an inappropriate student. The infiltration of key university bodies
490 ran so deep that clan members openly manifested their presence in academic meetings.

491 *Professor [P] reported the irregular presence of clan members in the Dean’s Office: “They regularly*
492 *walked in and out of the rooms with confidence and even offered me coffee”. Professor [Q] added that,*
493 *with the new Dean, s/he saw [bad apples] swaggering around his office (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

494 The clan transformed Troy University into a closed system, deflecting the attentions and support of
495 regulators and external parties. Hence, professors – while often disinclined to participate in the
496 misconduct – found few alternatives to it, as they feared for their lives and for their academic
497 careers. Clan supporters also prospered outside the university. These professors were given more
498 responsibilities in key processes and liaised with stakeholders gravitating outside the university.

499 *Clan control extended to its constant presence in the main elective bodies; to deep relationships with the*
500 *administrative staff; to hegemony in the Student Union. Here they successfully prevented any control or*
501 *any improvement of the monitoring system (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

502 Fourth, the clan *exploited weaknesses in the peer review system*. Professors could have spotted
503 irregularities in others' marking and graduation practices, and formed a united front to fight against
504 the clan infiltration. Notably, several professors acknowledged an "intolerable climate of
505 intimidation" in the university, and sometimes discussed this privately. However, there is no
506 evidence that professors allied to confront this problem. In part, this was due to the presence of the
507 clan in key structures and processes. Hence, professors did not have free spaces where they could
508 plan a defensive strategy without the intrusion of clan supporters. In part, professors had a pervasive
509 reluctance to "stick their noses into others' affairs" which was informed by their professional
510 autonomy. While investigations did not pay extensive attention to this aspect – as it did not violate
511 laws – several commentators argued that even "honest" professors had been slow to monitor others'
512 behaviours; as well as reluctant to allow external, impartial, parties monitor their own behaviours.

513 *Any attempt to denounce misconduct in Troy was always rejected as non-scientific. Professors would*
514 *discuss their problems only with their peers, and refuse to answer our questions. We asked about bombs*
515 *and blood, arguing that "keeping the peace and quiet" could have killed any of them. And yet, professors*
516 *argued that the accusations were not scientific, and thus worthless (Journalist, Newspaper extract)*

517 The clan could exploit the fact that professors already worked in disciplinary siloes and did not
518 intrude in the jurisdictions of their peers. On the one hand, it captured the professors individually,
519 without threatening the entire social network of peers gravitating around an exam. The clan
520 handpicked the recruited professors and peers, who may have sensed the presence of a mafia clan,
521 but did not have enough elements to denounce the specific corruptors and corrupted individuals.

522 *Our evidence shows that professors were captured individually. [Colluding professors, students or*
523 *stakeholders] got close to the professor, asked him/her to take care personally about that favour, unless*
524 *his/her peers were not already colluding with the clan (Verdict, Trial A)*

525 Notably, professors never reported their suspicion that one of their peers was engaged in
526 misconduct, unless s/he personally threatened them.

527 Fifth, the clan *did not intrude in other core professional jurisdictions*. The clan avoided areas of
528 professional work that professors might have protected more jealously. The investigations did not
529 provide any proof that the clan tried to control, for instance, any areas of research and teaching. The
530 clan did not need them as controlling the assessment and admission of students sufficed.

531 *Our investigations found evidence that the ‘system’ regarded only the passing of specific exams, the*
532 *admission of otherwise inadmissible students, and the support of their specialization. For other areas of*
533 *professors’ work, there is no evidence of any clan interference (Verdict, Trial A)*

534 This was a sensible choice because teaching curricula were strongly protected against radical
535 changes in the past. The Medical School experienced examples of professional resistance, even
536 during the clan infiltration. New content on abortion and end-of-life pathways, for instance, were
537 met with hostility by conservative professors, who actively campaigned against these innovations
538 and openly intruded in peers’ jurisdictions. By comparison, professors raised very little resistance
539 against the growing perception of misconduct in the University.

540 **PROTRACTING AND PROTECTING THE RECRUITMENT FOR 30 YEARS**

541 The “University of Exams” lasted for almost 30 years – a long period of misconduct that was
542 seldom punctuated by violent actions. The clan did not need to constantly adopt aggressive
543 behaviours to exert its control over the recruited professors, and to continue recruit new professors
544 in Troy University. Rather, it used a combination of four perverse and pervasive initiatives to
545 protect the recruited professionals from external investigations and internal defections; and continue
546 recruit new professors. Two actions were already presented above, i.e. the pervasive infiltration of
547 governing bodies and social influences within the university, and the perverse exploitation of
548 professional autonomy. These mechanisms supported the recruitment of professors, but also served
549 the purpose of “normalizing” the misconduct by protecting them from sanctions. For the sake of
550 brevity, we focus here on only two additional features.

551 First, *the clan exploited the ‘code of silence’ entrenched in mafia victims.* The investigations
552 exploited the pervasive fear of mafia retaliations underlying professors’ and students’ *omertá*. The
553 clan did not need constantly to threaten honest individuals because these were all aware of the mafia
554 method, and remained silent fearing even worse consequences. Professors and students made sure
555 that they did not know too much, not to expose themselves to additional risks. It was sufficient for
556 the clan to perform small gestures to communicate its presence and preserve the *status quo*.

557 *The clan used its power to generate a scenario of omertá and subjugation. This climate was characterized*
558 *by a looming menace which did not need to be made explicit with grand gestures. The victim already*
559 *knew the consequences of refusals (Verdict, Trial A)*

560 Second, *the clan gained the indirect support of students and external stakeholders*. The clan
561 provided perverse incentives to students and external stakeholders, who thus had reasons not to
562 report their suspicions. Students suspected dubious marking practices as they noticed the ‘small
563 gestures’ of the clan with professors and peers. They remained silent, fearing retaliation *and*
564 recognizing that they were not massively inconvenienced by the *status quo*. The clan ensured that
565 their protégées did not acquire ‘too high’ grades, and attract the hostility of other students. The clan
566 was worried that the gap between marks and skills could be so transparently wide that students
567 would complain about it. The clan expected its protégées to be “good enough” rather than the best
568 in the class; and sanctioned situations where professors were too generous or students went too far.

569 *Three students ranked well above the rest of the class. Clan intermediaries became very concerned that*
570 *this could attract too much attention: “We’ve made a mess!” They had instructed two students to copy all*
571 *the right answers, but the instruction was wrong. While the excellent result of one individual could be*
572 *normal, three individuals with scores well above the others raised suspicions (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)*

573 Several students contemplated the perverse benefits of the “University of Exams”, and moved to
574 Troy to take easier exams. These students knew they could graduate rapidly, and exploit the *status*
575 *quo*. Troy experienced a phenomenon of ‘adverse selection’ because talented students moved away
576 from Troy and were replaced by those who had failed elsewhere. Regular students also had no
577 compelling reason to denounce misconduct, as it could delegitimize their grades and because the
578 inflation of grades was convenient. As students’ careers could be complicated by a scandal in their
579 university, they were not incentivized to denounce cases of professional misconduct.

580 Besides these considerations, the clan reinforced its pre-existing ties with the ‘dominant elite’ by
581 exchanging the support and silence of external stakeholders (politicians, businessmen, healthcare
582 organizations) with favours. Political groups, for instance, exploited professors’ pork barrelling to
583 gain additional votes for the elections. Likewise, healthcare organizations and businesses exploited
584 university contracts and other financial incentives. Because Troy University was the key provider of
585 professional education, it possessed resources (e.g. access to grants) and influence (e.g. pork
586 barrelling) that incentivized stakeholders not to monitor and prevent misconduct.

587 *Clan influence expanded into local politics and business. The relations between Member [W] and*
588 *Politician [Y] are certain. [Y] informed [W] that a government role was available and they should “talk*

589 *about it. [W] argued: “we have thousands of votes” from professors’ pork barrelling. Doctor [T]*
590 *revealed that the clan provided jobs in companies working for the university (Verdict, Trial A)*

591 **DISCUSSION**

592 Our case study investigated how an external agent recruited professionals into its misconduct
593 project. Most research has focused on the enablers of misconduct as perceived and performed by
594 professionals (Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Kosmala and Herrback, 2006; Morris and Moore, 2000;
595 Sikka, 2009). Few studies took the perspective of the external agents penetrating organizational
596 boundaries and steering professionals’ behaviours toward misconduct (Muzio et al., 2016; Palmer,
597 2012). These studies present an important gap in our understanding of professional misconduct, i.e.
598 they overlook the interplay of perverse and pervasive mechanisms when external agents recruit
599 professionals in their misconduct project. In these studies, professionals are recruitment primarily
600 through perverse mechanisms, such as incentives and threats (Moynihan and Cassels, 2008).
601 Studies on pervasive mechanisms instead explain the broader contamination of institutional
602 contexts and professional associations (Jaraush, 1990). To instead investigate the interplay between
603 perverse *and* pervasive mechanisms, our study focused on an ‘abnormal’ misconduct project (i.e.
604 corrupted exam marking) designed by ‘abhorrent’ social agents (i.e. a clan), and mostly executed by
605 ‘normal’, reluctant, professionals. Our findings reveal that the capacity of the external agent to
606 recruit these professionals could not be explained simply with the use of incentives. Rather, the
607 external agent: (i) *infiltrated* the professional system to implement perverse interventions and
608 control pervasive processes; and (ii) used a *stepped approach* to normalize the misconduct. These
609 findings represent our main contributions, and will be discussed in the following sections.

610 ***Infiltrating pervasive professional processes with a Trojan horse for perverse reasons***

611 Past research suggests that professionals mostly enact misconduct as a deviant behaviour because of
612 perverse mechanisms; *or*, alternatively, as a normal behaviour because of pervasive mechanisms
613 (Palmer, 2012). Diversely, the mafia clan studied here strategically combined perverse *and*
614 pervasive mechanisms to recruit and control professionals in a misconduct project. This is
615 somewhat surprising, as the lack of control over organizational and professional processes of the

616 mafia clan may suggest a primary, if not exclusive, focus on perverse antecedents, e.g. incentives
617 and threats. Contrary to this hypothesis, however, the mafia clan was capable of nesting pervasive
618 mechanisms into perverse ones to achieve superior outcomes. For instance, while the mafia clan
619 used incentives and threats to unsettle single professionals, it used a broader socio-administrative
620 system (e.g. consisting of affiliated students, corrupted professors, deviated Dean's Office and
621 external stakeholders) to exert constant pressure on several professionals at once. The activation of
622 both perverse and pervasive mechanisms allowed the mafia clan to reach individual professionals,
623 and customize its influence on their specific needs and/or fears. Our findings highlight a stark
624 dichotomy between interventions targeting pre-disposed professionals (mostly grounded on
625 incentives, hierarchical control, co-participation in the strategy) and those targeting reluctant
626 professionals (mostly grounded on threats, and internal controls from pervasive mechanisms).

627 This result furnishes insights into how external agents penetrate organizational practices that are
628 otherwise jealously protected by professionals. Rather than attempting to disrupt and revise these
629 practices, which likely engender strong resistance from professionals (Currie et al., 2012;
630 Llewellyn, 2001), external agents may find professional environments where organizational
631 practices have been weakened by professionals pre-disposed to misconduct, and exploit the
632 presence of these actors to import their misconduct project. In our study, the external agents
633 *infiltrated* the organization to first import their project from outside and then normalize it from the
634 inside. The infiltration strategy blurred the line between perverse and pervasive mechanisms, since
635 the abnormal incentives and threats were channelled by 'normal' professional structures and actors
636 (e.g. students, Dean's Office, professional peers).

637 We thus suggest that the infiltration of professional structures supported *a perverse and intentional*
638 *use of pervasive mechanisms to recruit professionals in a misconduct project*. This is different from
639 what has been previously reported by the literature, according to which pervasive mechanisms tend
640 to create misconduct unintentionally, e.g. obtuse controls and inefficient communication systems
641 might aim to 'do good', but backfire (Gabbioneta et al., 2014; McGivern and Ferlie, 2007; Palmer,

642 2012). In these circumstances, professionals replicate misconduct over time without complaining,
643 because they take cues from superiors, peers, clients and guidelines, and do not perceive their
644 behaviour as misconduct. In our case study, the external agent achieved a similarly pervasive effect
645 (i.e. professionals replicated misconduct without complaining) despite the fact that professionals
646 were keenly aware of the abnormal nature of their misconduct. This is because, while incentives
647 and threats motivated the misconduct, the control of pervasive processes (e.g. peer pressure,
648 situational influences, governing bodies) pre-empted the capacity of the reluctant professionals to
649 fight back. Particularly, the reluctant professors had no space where they could safely isolate
650 themselves from the agents of misconduct, and where they could form a united front against them.
651 In order to strategically combine perverse and pervasive mechanisms, the external agents needed to
652 build a Trojan horse. We labelled the case as ‘Troy’ to resonate with the Iliad, and convey the
653 notion that external agents had to infiltrate the organization. Unlike the Iliad, however, the mafia
654 clan in our case study did not just use ‘soldiers’ from their own camp (e.g. clan members), but
655 populated the ‘belly’ of the horse with *insiders* (i.e. pre-disposed students, and administrators) who
656 knew the profession and/or the organization from the inside. The role of the pre-disposed professors
657 was especially important. External agents typically lack legitimacy and expertise to move freely in
658 the professional organization, so they need individuals that can provide these resources on their
659 behalf. The pre-disposed professionals were necessary to have: (i) *internal knowledge brokers*, who
660 understood professionals dynamics and knew who could be corrupted and how to hide the
661 misconduct; (ii) *internal carriers of misconduct*, who exerted an administrative and social influence
662 on others; and (iii) a *linchpin* between the interests and goals of the external agent and the practice
663 and norms of the profession. These professors were recruited by the mafia clan through perverse
664 mechanisms, but also co-designed and implemented recruitment initiatives targeting individual
665 peers and infiltrating the governing bodies – which could have been out-of-reach, expensive or
666 risky for the external agent. The importance of the pre-disposed professionals as linchpins between
667 ‘abhorrent’ external agents and ‘normal’ professionals resonates with earlier studies on

668 organizational change and professional resistance. Past studies noted that regulators and managers
669 struggle to orient professionals toward new practices, and need to engage hybrid managers acting as
670 ‘two-way windows’ and translating their strategy to professionals (Burgess et al., 2015; Llewellyn,
671 2001). Very similarly, the pre-disposed professors acted as ‘two-way windows’ as they embraced
672 the logics and interests of the external agents and knew the norms and practices of the profession.

673 *Exploiting ‘normal’ professional features for ‘abnormal’ recruitments*

674 Past studies have highlighted that processes of professional change initiated by external agents are
675 often triggered by a precipitating jolt and then unfold slowly, as non-professional agents may need
676 to exploit precipitating jolts (e.g. the death of patient, financial scandals) and still need to implement
677 incremental interventions with the help of professionals (Greenwood et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2006).
678 The proponents of these changes tried to evolve organizational practices toward ‘better conduct’ or
679 remained neutral about the ethical implications (Greenwood et al., 2002; Kellogg, 2009; Muzio et
680 al., 2013). Relatively little is instead known about processes of professional change where ‘good
681 conduct’ is meant to deteriorate. Shedding a light on the latter, our case study described a process of
682 change that was not activated by any visible and “abnormal” event, and at the same time was
683 relatively rapid. Misconduct projects, unlike positive professionalization projects, aim to go
684 unnoticed and thus seek the ‘silence’ of externally not visible and rapid changes. To achieve this,
685 our findings suggest the importance of organizational affordances (i.e. contradictions and
686 ambiguities in professional conduct that pre-existed the recruitment strategy). The misconduct
687 project was pursued in a weakened professional context, where existing arrangements already
688 legitimized imperfect exam marking exercises, and where some individuals had already liaised with
689 external agents. The identification of a flawed professional context was the first stage of a stepped
690 approach that, however, did not exploit precipitating jolts or the emergence of new players (as in
691 Greenwood et al., 2002), but on the contrary a stable professional environment where incumbent
692 players were already afforded some degree of misconduct. The mafia clan built on these
693 weaknesses to expand the diffusion and depth of the misconduct. These findings resonate with

694 earlier research on ‘organizational affordances’ (van Dijk et al., 2011; Radaelli et al., 2017) which
695 argued that innovations and changes are more likely to emerge in professional contexts with
696 unresolved contradictions and ambiguities. Professionals, in these contexts, need to make sense of
697 the ambiguities and solve the contradictions; thus they are more inclined to change their practices.
698 Likewise, with misconduct, professionals need to make sense of different interests and logics that
699 coexist in their environment. They may thus be more inclined to deviate from norms.

700 We suggest that ‘organizational affordances’ are not necessarily perverse and extraordinary features
701 of professional organizations; they may be pervasive and ‘normal’. Our case suggests that
702 professional work possesses three main forces – i.e. autonomy, multiple embeddedness, and
703 trusteeship – that are originally meant to protect the professions from misconduct but
704 simultaneously supported contradictory goals (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). First, autonomy is
705 expected to protect professionals from external influences, and yet at Troy University it had
706 pervasive effects on misconduct. The mafia clan did not disrupt practices of professional autonomy
707 because they guaranteed its ‘opaque quality’ against peer reviews and external monitoring; hence
708 misconduct could be hidden and justified more easily. Furthermore, the clan exploited the fact that
709 professionals were already respectful of peers’ autonomy and did not monitor their conduct.
710 Professional autonomy was not even revised, but exploited and ramped up with administrative and
711 social systems that further discouraged collaborations and mutual control. Second, professionals are
712 naturally embedded in multiple environments, which in theory impart greater quality to their
713 services. Professors, for instance, are expected to navigate other professional and industrial
714 environments to increase the relevance of their teaching and practice. This multiple embeddedness
715 may have pervasive effects on misconduct once professionals negotiate their work and its outcome
716 with other professions or interest groups (McGivern and Ferlie, 2007; Muzio et al., 2016). Medicine
717 professors, in particular, are likely to work in the healthcare field; to negotiate resources with
718 multiple suppliers for their teaching and clinics; to attract the interests of politics and business – and
719 so on. It follows that professionals (i) are intrinsically exposed to multiple professional interests and

720 non-professional ‘temptations’ and (ii) almost inevitably serve multiple clients (e.g. students,
721 patients, industries, citizens). The contradiction between the norms of the multiple contexts in
722 which professionals are embedded can be exploited by external agents to make the notion of ‘good
723 conduct’ more fluid, and gradually engender misconduct. For instance, by exchanging misconduct
724 with improvements in clinical work, professionals ‘balanced the ledger’ between the interests of
725 patients with those of students. Finally, professionals’ trusteeship norms may have pervasive effects
726 on misconduct, which contradict the intended benefits on clients. Trusteeship norms prioritize
727 clients’ interest over self-interest, and thus are meant to prevent misconduct (Von Nordenflycht,
728 2010). However, pursuing the interests of clients “too much” may backfire and generate negative
729 outcomes. Our study highlights that professionals pursued the interests of some of their clients (e.g.
730 patients) at the expense of others (e.g. students and taxpayers). External agents may exploit the
731 ‘grey area’ between different trusteeship norms to normalize misconduct with ad-hoc incentives.

732 **CONCLUSIONS**

733 This study has investigated how an external agent recruited professionals in its misconduct project.
734 Our findings highlighted the possibility to infiltrate professional and organizational boundaries
735 using a combination of perverse and pervasive mechanisms. Professional organizations may host
736 individuals that are pre-disposed to misconduct. External agents can exploit their expertise and
737 status to co-design a misconduct project. Thanks to their mediation, external agents may become
738 able to ‘handpick’ and control professionals that are otherwise reluctant to enact misconduct.

739 Further research can build on our contribution. In our case, an illegal external agent (i.e. a mafia
740 clan) successfully recruited professional actors (i.e. professors) and influenced their work to pursue
741 a misconduct project. Future research could extend our findings by exploring additional scenarios.
742 First: what happens when external agents are legal organizations using permissible incentives to
743 pursue their private agendas (e.g. companies providing universities with on-field projects or
744 professional opportunities)? How professional actors manage, or mismanage, the challenge of
745 gaining external benefits while preserving good conduct represents a fertile area for future

746 contributions. Second: what can professional organizations do to prevent or react to the infiltration
747 of illegal organizations? Our case represented a success from the point of view of the mafia clan.
748 Other studies may conversely elaborate theories on how professionals identify external threats and
749 protect themselves. Third: do external agents change when they develop partnerships with
750 professionals? Our study focused on the external agents' bad influence on professional actors.
751 Future research may highlight if and how professional actors may in turn influence the work and
752 goals of external agents. Fourth: do external agents use other approaches to infiltrate or exploit
753 professional actors? Particularly, future research could explore if and how external agents might
754 pursue their private agendas by exploiting professionals' good conduct, rather than deviate it.
755 To conclude, we want to highlight some considerations on our methodology. We relied closely on
756 secondary sources, most of which were collected by actors (e.g. law-enforcement agencies) for non-
757 research purposes. Key informants were inaccessible for primary data collection, and this is indeed
758 typical of several instances of professional misconduct and illicit activities. We believe that the use
759 of secondary sources is vital for increasing the number and quality of studies on these elusive
760 topics, as we could analyse data that we could not have collected on our own (e.g. insights into the
761 criminal activities obtained directly from wiretapped conversations). By navigating this trade-off,
762 we believe that the literature on professional misconduct could gain access to vital, and yet
763 otherwise inaccessible, phenomena.

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Table 1: Data Sources

Trial	Judicial Document	Authors	Year	Purpose of Document	Pages
A	Arrest Warrant #1	Court X	2000	Alleged clan affiliates and members are sent to trial for illegal activities at Troy University	200+
	Arrest Warrant #2	Court Y	2001		50+
	Verdict of full trial	Court X	2005	Document describes infiltration of Troy University and explains reasons for conviction	350+
B	Verdict of full trial	Court Z	2011	Documents provide data on the strategy of the mafia clan (and related organization) to infiltrate business and public administration.	2000+
	Verdict of appeal trial	Court U	2014		800+
	Verdict of last resort trial	S.C. Cassation	2015	Documents represent the three degrees of law.	5+
Additional data on Mafia Clan					
Newspaper articles, documentary transcripts, reportages		Various	2000-2015	External reports, interviews, and narratives related to the 'ndrangheta infiltration of professional fields	150+
Additional data on Troy University					
Books B1		Anonymized	1976	It describes the social and political context of the Troy area in the mid-70s	240+
Books B2		Anonymized	2010	It describes social and political context of the Troy area in	220+
Books B3		Anonymized	2010	It describes the links between Mafia phenomena and social class	350+
Additional data on Mafia activities and infiltration of Public Administration					
Parliament Report on Organized Crime and Mafia		Parliament Anti-Mafia commission	2000	Research documents on infiltration phenomena. Include analyses of cases, and background information	200+
Parliament Report on Organized Crime and Mafia			2008		150+
Parliament Report on Organized Crime and Mafia			2015		150+
6-month Report on Mafia		DIA.	2011	Report on Mafia-related phenomena. Includes analyses of cases, and background information	350+
Annual Report on Mafia and Terrorism		DNA.	2013		900+
Prefectural Decree		Anonymized	2005	Document on infiltration of healthcare and professional bodies	150+

Note: S.C.Cassation = Supreme Court of Cassation; DIA = Anti-Mafia Investigation Directorate; DNA = Anti-Mafia National Directorate

Table 2: Data Coding Process

(Additional) Exemplary Quotes	Recruiting Theme	Dimension
<i>Clan leaders have long sent their children to hang out with professionals' children, and eventually marry them. They send them to the best universities to manage business professionally without a criminal record (Judge Alfa, Newspaper interview 1) Witness [Alpha], former clan member and student of Troy University, noted that the Student Union was already a warehouse for clans' weapons. This was common knowledge among students (Arrest Warrant, Trial A)</i>	Pre-existing relationships with professionals	Selecting 'appropriate' context
<i>From the seventies onwards, Troy experienced the establishment of [the elite] influencing the labour market to consolidate its power. The elite developed a network of favours aimed at replicating the system of power over time. In this overall scheme, it was crucial that the 'children' of the elite would graduate at Troy, possibly with honours (Book B1, Excerpt)</i>	Weakened university arrangements	
<i>The University provided modules that were not available elsewhere, so it appealed to students from several other regions. It was not unusual for Troy to receive applications from students well beyond its natural 'catchment area'. The clan exploited this heterogeneity to mingle its own students (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</i>	Troy as legitimate professional provider	
<i>Professor [M] explicitly mentioned that Professor [R] could reach any department for misconduct, to repay the clan for money s/he had been loaned (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A) Professor [Z] and her assistant [AA] colluded with clan members to support the case of student [BB]. The investigation revealed a large number of phone calls among the individuals, indicating reciprocal trust and friendship. Professor [Z] had collaborated intensely with the clan to gain favours that went beyond money (Arrest Warrant 2, Trial A)</i>	Recruiting professors with incentives	Recruiting pre-disposed professionals
<i>Professor M aggressively ordered administrators to "mind their own business" on the admission exams as s/he had interests to defend. When removed from the Dean's Office s/he threatened the intervention of the clan (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A) Colluding professors applied pressure on peers, replicating the approach they had learned from clan members. First they approached the colleagues, and invited them to be more generous in marking. If colleagues resisted, the colluding professors would allude to their 'friendship' with the clan, or directly threaten them. (Verdict, Trial A)</i>	Embedding professors in clan culture and practice	
<i>Phone call records indicate an unusual number of calls from [clan members] to Professor Z which reveal how often the former asked for clarifications and updates from the latter (Arrest Warrant 2, Trial A)</i>	Monitoring professors through chain of command	
<i>Some professors resisted the clan's intimidation attempts. The clan often escalated its threats to physical violence [e.g. murdering a professor]. Sometimes, however, the clan "let them go" and focused on alternative options, easier to "capture" (Verdict, Trial A)</i>	Identifying a selected group of professors	Recruiting reluctant professionals
<i>The incentives provided by the clan intermediaries were often paradoxical. They would protect professors from external threats which their own clan had created. This protection would materialize only in exchange of favours. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</i>	Incentives and threats	
<i>Situational Influence: In one case, for instance, a number of old people attended an exam. Hiding behind newspapers, they monitored the exam, and left only when reassured that their student had passed the exam (Arrest Warrant, Trial A) It cannot be demonstrated that Assistant [AA] enacted her misconduct to gain personal rewards from the clan, as it arguably accommodated professional (rather than criminal) pressures from her superior (Arrest Warrant 2, Trial A)</i>	Controlling professors with infiltrated students, pre-disposed professors, and stakeholders	
<i>Peer Pressure: The colluding professors infiltrated key governance bodies, where they liaised with peers and administrators, either by building new alliances or intimidating them. The same activities applied at student level, where colluding students similarly used panels (e.g. from Student Union) to recruit peers and intimidate them (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</i>		
<i>Administrative control: Afraid of the real danger of [clan's] threats, the commission panel agreed to help the young students. It is notable, in this regard, how Professor [E] was excluded by the panel because s/he was regarded harder to convince (Arrest</i>		

<i>Warrant, Trial A)</i>		
<i>The [Head of Department] had promoted a new system whereby students would be tutored by one professor, and assessed by a panel of others. This provoked much resistance from the community. Professors had not been able to reach an agreement, so [the Head of department] tried to impose her solution to modernize the school (Professor Alpha, TV interview*)</i>	Exploiting weak peer review system	
<i>[Commemorating the Head of Department] Her main accomplishment was her research [on advanced surgery techniques] that had gained national prominence. There was some initial disagreement on this research stream, but eventually s/he developed the evidence that now is used at national level (Professor Alpha, TV interview*)</i>	Preserving core jurisdictions	
<i>Witness [Beta] reported that “eventually, the clan controlled the activities of the University, and particular of the Medical School and its related Hospital. This business was organized by the clan, but managed by [a list of 12 names, combination of clan members, colluding professors, healthcare professionals liaising with professors]. They used their influence and that projected by the clan. (Verdict, Trial A)</i>	Controlling professors with network of insiders	
<i>The election of a new dean or control systems usually provokes a strong debate, but otherwise professors are very free in their discipline. The university is so compartmentalized that professors do not poke their noses into others’ business. (Professor Alpha, TV interview*)</i>	Exploiting weak peer review system	
<i>In a testimony, Professor [C] stated that: “over the years, I have noticed that new students replaced those who had historically performed all the threats. But this did not gainsay our perception that they all belonged to the same organization, and therefore that it was in our best interest to remain silent (Full Verdict, Trial A) Professor [K]’s behaviour is indicative of the climate of intimidation at Troy. Only a few hours after denouncing threats to the police, s/he retracted the allegations, arguing: “I probably gave too much importance to the events” (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</i>	Exploiting victim’s code of silence	Protracting and protecting the recruitment over time
<i>The infiltration of Troy went beyond exam marking. It was a means to control the territory – to gain favours that other stakeholders would need to repay in different forms (Congressman C, Antimafia Commission proceeding) A key university supplier was by a clan member. Wiretapped conversations demonstrated that this person actively promised to “find jobs” for [stakeholders] in the University in exchange for appropriate favours (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A) The clan did not forget the favours made for its students, asking to be “paid back” by promoting the role of clan intermediaries at Troy University (Verdict, Trial A) Student [X] joined the business, developing her own network of students that could be “helped”. Using her connection with Student/Member [F], [X] signalled a list of students that were willing to pay large sums of money to her. [X] would then share some of its profits with [F], who would eventually recruit professors for the misconduct (Verdict, Trial A)</i>	Gaining students’ and stakeholders’ support	

** Note: The reported interview came before Trials A and B, and described events happening during the early stages of the clan’s infiltration in Troy. The informant did not intend to allude that the professors’ resistance was connected to the clan. The information is useful instead to describe (i) the existence of a professional struggle to implement peer reviews and (ii) a ‘normal’ climate of research and teaching, where professors could operate at high-level.*